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REDISCOVERING THE SITE OF THE LARNE VIKING BURIAL[1]

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The site of the discovery of a Viking burial at Larne, Co Antrim, in 1840 is for the first time identified.

In November 1840 workmen constructing a tramway on the coast near Larne, Co Antrim, discovered a skeleton and associated grave-goods. From the description of the grave-goods it was correctly recognised as the burial of a Viking warrior (SMR ANT 040:058).[2] The antiquary Joseph Huband Smith dealt with the find and contributed this brief description to a meeting of the Royal Irish Academy in January 1841:

> some lime quarries having been lately opened along the shore, at a distance from the jetty, or a wooden pier, at which small coasting vessels, trading between Larne and the opposite ports of Scotland, usually take in their cargoes, it became necessary, for the greater convenience of transporting limestone from the newly opened quarries, to construct a rail or tramway. In leveling [sic] the line marked out for the purposes of such construction, in the afternoon of the 7th of last November [1840], the workmen discovered these remains at a spot three quarters of a mile distant from the town of Larne, about seventy yards from the sea shore, and about five feet above the level of high water mark (Smith 1844, 41–2).

Over time, the location of this important discovery faded and, until recently, was thought to be lost. Fanning suggested in 1970 that while 'the exact location cannot now be determined the find-spot was probably in the townland of Inver' (Fanning 1970, 71, n 4). In 2014 Harrison and Ó Floinn placed it farther to the south of Larne in 'the northern end of the townland of Glynn', which is situated on the western shore of Larne Lough (Harrison & Ó Floinn 2014, 644). However, research by Antrim County Archaeological Society – using historical sources, maps, local newspapers, local knowledge and industrial heritage records – now allows the true location of the Larne Viking burial to be identified.[3]

Rev Classon Porter, a Presbyterian minister and local historian in Larne (Carson Williams 2009), was aware of the discovery and gave a detailed description of the location at a lecture delivered in McGarel Town Hall, Larne, in November 1872 (Porter 1872) and in an article in the *Larne Weekly Reporter* on 20 May 1871. According to the latter account:

> [t]he lands of Corran and Drumalis [sic] being thus contiguous to Larne Lough were of course witnesses to the various events, which, since the beginning of time, have happened in that lough or its immediate neighbourhood. These events however, belong rather to the history of the lough than to the history of the lands, but I may mention that in the year 1840 when excavations were being made by Mr. Agnew[4] for the construction of a tramway between the Corran [sic] of Larne and the limestone quarries along the shore, the labourers discovered near the Bankheads, a human skeleton of rather gigantic proportions, together with a sword of corresponding size, and some ornaments of an antique and curious construction. These were probably the remains of some Scandinavian invader of our shore, for Larne Lough was in ancient times very much frequented by the Norsemen who were sea-pirates; and history tells us that in the year 1018 our lough was the scene of a great sea fight between the Orkney yarl Einar and Connor King of Ireland, in which the Norsemen were defeated and driven from our coast (Porter 1871).

The first-edition Ordnance Survey (OS) 6-inch map, surveyed c 1830, shows a quarry in the townland of Blackcave South in an area known as Waterloo. According to Porter,

> [t]his quarry was owned by William Agnew who had a lease of Curran and Drumalis [sic]

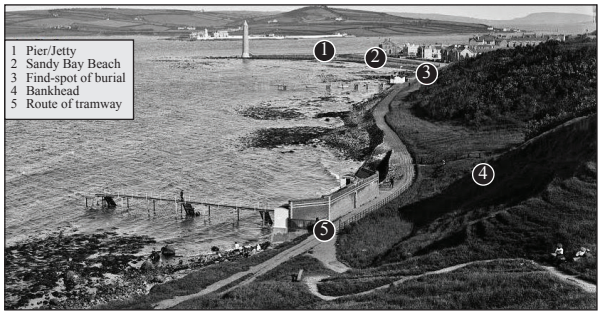

Fig 1 The shore at Curran and Drumaliss photographed c 1900; numbered features include the location of the Viking burial (3).

townland and was responsible for building a quay or pier just north of the present harbour (Porter 1871).

The second edition of the OS map, surveyed c 1860, shows that the quarry operation had moved north of the 1830 workings. This move may have been necessary due to the construction of the Antrim coast road. The route of the tramway can be seen on the map.

Some sources had overlooked the significance of the term 'sea shore' mentioned in Smith's account of the burial. The Antrim County Archaeological Society research team has been able to identify it as a beach called Sandy Bay near Bankheads in Curran and Drumaliss townland, a location shown in a photograph taken c 1900 (Fig 1). The Waterloo quarries (marked 'Viaduct' on the second edition of the OS map), the route of the tramway (second edition OS map), the lime kilns (HB06/08/007) and the pier north of the present harbour have also been identified. Thus the Larne Viking burial is now definitively assigned to Curran and Drumaliss and Fig 2 shows its probable position, where the promenade at Larne Leisure Centre is now located.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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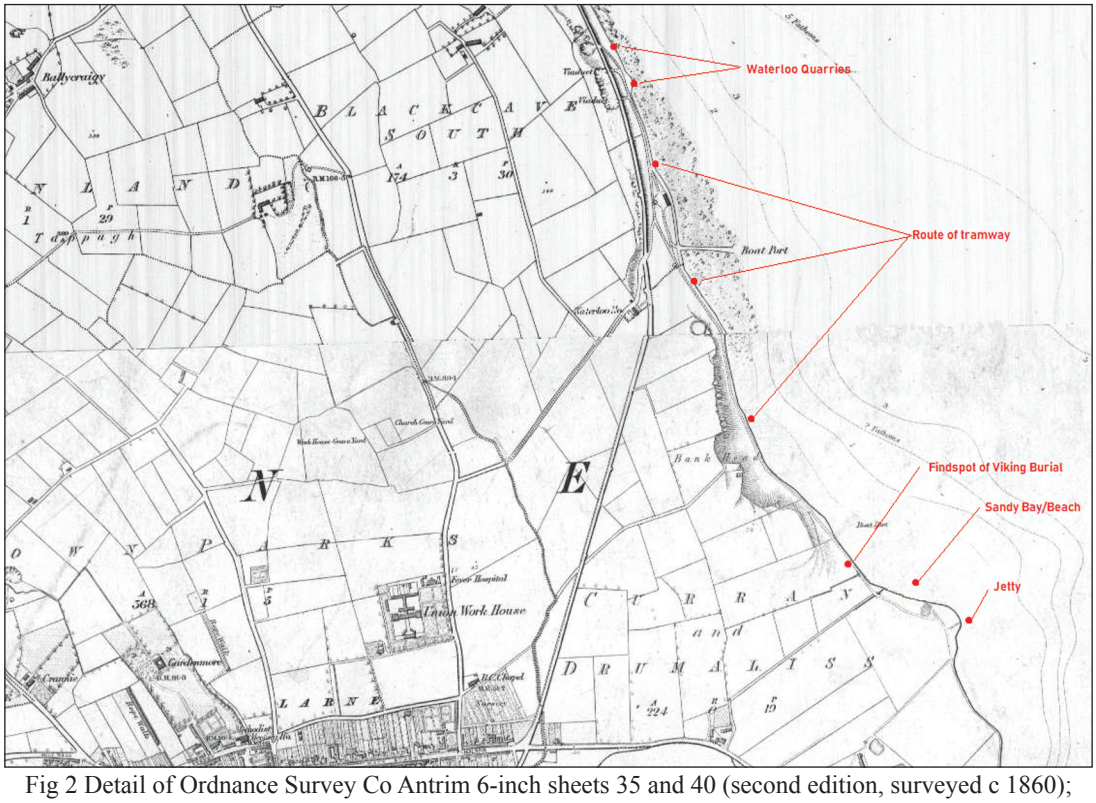

Fig 2 Detail of Ordnance Survey Co Antrim 6-inch sheets 35 and 40 (second edition, surveyed c 1860); labelled features include the location of the Viking burial.

NOTES

1 This paper enlarges on a note published in the Winter 2020–21 UAS *Newsletter* (Prunner & Cameron 2021).

2 The SMR entry has recently been updated to take account of the information published here.

3 The society has been researching the lesser-known sites of east Antrim for over twenty years and has rediscovered ten sites previously thought lost, with twelve new sites pending inclusion in the HERoNI records.

4 According to O'Laverty (1884, 160), '[t]he family of Agnew, obtained temporary leases of the Curran, but Captain William Agnew obtained, on May 1st, 1823, from Lord Donegall, a lease for lives renewable for ever, 'of that parcel of land, called the Curran of Larne …'. This included the site of the Friary of Drumalis. Mr. Agnew's interest in this lease, has passed by purchase to James Chaine, Esq., M. P.'

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